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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 AMMAN 000237

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/09/2013

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SUBJECT: JORDAN FIRST CAMPAIGN PRESSES AHEAD:

RECOMMENDATIONS INCLUDE QUOTAS FOR WOMEN PARLIAMENTARIANS

REF: AMMAN 6522

Classified By: CDA GREGORY L. BERRY FOR REASONS 1.5 (B) AND (D)

SUMMARY

1. (C) The "Jordan First" campaign continues to make headlines almost daily as the GOJ moves to implement recommendations put forward in December by the Jordan First Committee--consisting of 31 political and business leaders. While some of the initiatives are straightforward, others--particularly the introduction of quotas for women in Parliament--have proven to be controversial. The Islamic Action Front (IAF) and Opposition Parties--those who have been able to capitalize most on popular pan-Arab issues--have not surprisingly voiced their opposition to the "Jordan First" campaign. End Summary.

RECOMMENDATIONS INCLUDE SPRING ELECTIONS: KING AGREES

3. (C) The "Jordan First" committee presented its findings and recommendations to King Abdullah on December 18 and the GOJ has moved apace to implement the findings. Prime Minister Abul Ragheb on January 8 announced the formation of five new committees that will be charged with implementing the recommendations of the original committee: the Constitutional Court Committee, the Political Parties Committee, the Women's Parliamentary Quota Committee, the Anti-Corruption Committee, and the Professional Associations and Civil Society Institutions Committee.

4. (C) The committee's specific recommendations included: quotas for women in parliament, the creation of a constitutional court, school curricula reform, and amending the political parties law to strengthen the political party system. The committee also recommended that elections be held this spring, an idea the King subsequently reaffirmed. The focus of the five newly-formed committees suggest that the government's attention will mostly be on political and judicial reform.

QUOTAS FOR WOMEN ALSO INCLUDED

5. (C) The most controversial of the recommendations--and one the King seemed committed to--is the adoption of temporary quotas for women in parliament. The quota issue has been controversial even among politically-active women who would most benefit. In discussions with several women who had recently returned from the US after participating in the IV program "Women as Political Leaders: US Elections and Political Campaigns", Poloff found that two of the five voiced opposition to the quotas. One argued that the IAF--who she opined did not represent the interests of women--would be able to capitalize on the quotas because of their effective campaign machinery and might win a majority of the women-quota seats with their own female candidates. Those women who approved of the quota emphasized that it would be a temporary measure, to allow women a toehold in the lower (i.e. elected) house of Parliament. Some also suggest that representation for women would help moderate the IAF, as well as Jordanian political life as a whole. Both proponents and opponents of a quota system stress that training for women in Parliament will be vital, since the professionalism that they show will help determine opportunities for women candidates in the future.

6. (C) The GOJ has yet to define how the quotas will be enforced, but there is almost a universal assumption that there will be a mechanism in place by the Spring elections. The issue of women quotas is likely to be particularly controversial among the more traditional tribal elements. Poloff talked to conservative East Banker Mahmoud Kharabsheh, who, as a "Jordan First" committee member, was the lone vote against establishing quotas. Kharabsheh argued that the quotas for women were illegal from a constitutional perspective (though there are already quotas in place for some minorities, such as Circassians), and that the current law already allowed for women to be elected (though under the current electoral law, only one woman has ever been popularly

elected).

IAF AND OPPOSITION NOT SOLD

17. (C) The IAF has publicly criticized the campaign. An article in As-Sabeel, the IAF mouthpiece, accused the "Jordan First" campaign of contradicting the sections of the constitution that stipulate the religion of the state as Islam and that Jordan is a part of the Arab nation. The IAF also claimed that the campaign was designed to restrict the Islamic movement and political parties, and to undermine the (political) role of professional unions.

18. (C) The IAF generates much of its popular support by embracing popular pan-Arab issues. They have been able to capitalize on "anti-normalization" issues and will most likely be some of the loudest voices of dissent should there be any military action against Iraq. There is no incentive for the IAF to shift the debate to internal issues in Jordan while regional issues have the ire and attention of most of their constituency.

19. (C) The Opposition Parties Higher Coordination Committee--made up of 13 parties (including the IAF) with disparate agendas--declined a GOJ-invitation to participate on the committee that will oversee political parties. The spokesperson for the opposition parties publicly argued that political reform should wait until after parliamentary elections, when new laws would not be relegated to temporary law status.

110. (C) The GOJ has begun to push back against the criticism. Minister of State for Political Affairs and Minister of Information Mohammad Adwan voiced his criticism of the opposition parties' stance in the Jordan Times on January 9: "They prefer to stay on the sidelines of the scene specializing in criticizing without helping the different segments of society and participating in the constructive building of a strong Jordan." A Jordan Times editorial the same day opined that the opposition parties' decision not to participate was, "at the least disappointing, if not utterly irresponsible."

COMMENT

111. (C) The GOJ is pursuing the "Jordan First" campaign with increasing vigor as the expected US conflict with Iraq draws nearer and the Israeli-Palestinian crisis deepens. There is still some skepticism in Jordanian society that "Jordan First" is merely an amalgam of empty slogans that will effect little change. Whether it will achieve its goal of forging a national identity and re-focusing the populace on internal issues is unclear, but it has been the impetus for a commitment to Spring elections and could bring some welcome reforms in the political and judicial sectors.
BERRY